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Describes the medical beliefs and practices of Barbadian slaves. Author discusses the role of supernatural forces in slave medicine, the range of beliefs and practices encompassed by the term Obeah, and how the meaning of this term changed over time. He emphasizes the importance of African beliefs and practices on which Barbadian slave medicine fundamentally rested. In the appendix, the author discusses the early use of the term Obeah in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean.

In: New West Indian Guide/ Nieuwe West-Indische Gids 74 (2000), no: 1/2, Leiden, 57-90

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SLAVE MEDICINE AND OBEAH IN BARBADOS,  
CIRCA 1650 TO 1834

This paper addresses the medical beliefs and practices of Barbadian slaves.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, it seeks to clarify the role of supernatural forces in slave medicine, the range of beliefs and practices encompassed by the term Obeah, and how the meaning of the term changed over time. Although the historical evidence is often very limited, fragmentary, and obscure, it nonetheless offers clues as to the major elements of slave medicine and Obeah. These clues can be elaborated and reasonable inferences made, where historical materials are either lacking or very sparse, by applying African ethnographic materials and broad anthropological theory on magic, witchcraft, and sorcery. One cannot understand slave medicine in Barbados (or the wider Caribbean) without taking into consideration the African beliefs and practices on which it fundamentally rested.<sup>2</sup>

1. Preliminary drafting of some of the issues relating to this paper took place while I was an Associate at the DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research, Harvard University, in 1989-90. The first version of this paper was presented in October 1992 at "The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion" conference at Hamilton College. The present version was prepared while I was a fellow at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, Charlottesville. Rosanne Adderley, Richard Drayton, Joseph Miller, Kenneth Bilby, Philip Morgan, and Robert Vinson offered useful comments on earlier drafts. JoAnn Jacoby assisted in collecting African ethnographic materials from library sources, and Elaine Breslaw, Douglas Chambers, David Eltis, Magnus Huber, Robin Law, Christine Matthews, and Frederick Smith helped with several research issues and problems. Marcus and Sally Vergette helped immeasurably in many other ways.

2. The medical beliefs and practices of enslaved Africans is a topic that is not conventionally treated in any detail in the scholarship on British Caribbean slavery or West Indian medical history. One major reason why British Caribbean scholarship has overwhelmingly focused on European medical practices undoubtedly stems from the extraordinarily limited primary source information on slave medicine. Another reason may relate to traditional topical and methodological interests of historians, including a general reluctance to treat African ethnographic materials and apply them to the early West Indian setting. Whatever the reasons, the fact remains that discussions of slave medicine are extremely limited. As a result, modern scholarship, intentionally or otherwise, has given the erroneous impression that slaves had a relatively small role to play in treating their ailments and physical complaints. See, for example, Craton 1978; Higman 1984; Kiple 1984; Sheridan 1985; Bush 1990.

The medical care of Barbadian slaves, like that in other Caribbean slave societies, fell into two broad, sometimes overlapping, categories. One was the slave community's self-help system, including several types of specialized practitioners, the other the care provided by slavemasters or plantation managements; the latter was essentially an extension of European medicine. The system of Euro-plantation medicine in Barbados was organized in a similar fashion to that of other British West Indian slave societies (Higman 1984:260-72; Sheridan 1985:268-320, *passim*; Handler 1997a). But plantation medical care, such as it was, overwhelmingly applied to working slaves and children with the potential to grow into productive laborers. It was oriented toward preserving the fitness of the labor force and its economic productivity, and, by the end of the eighteenth century toward insuring its natural increase. Whites generally showed little interest in the lame, elderly, or otherwise incapacitated, although these attitudes varied among individual slavemasters and by time period.

Data on European medical procedures and the organization of plantation medical treatment are much more plentiful than data on the medical practices of the slaves themselves, and thus can create an impression that European medicine had the major impact on slave life. Yet, such was not the case. In the earliest periods of plantation slavery, from around the 1650s to the early to mid 1700s, when whites viewed slaves more as expendable commodities and the costs of purchasing them were relatively low, slavemasters made few allowances for slave medical care. Although white medical practitioners were occasionally hired, slaves overwhelmingly relied on self-help and depended on the resources of their own communities; as the years progressed, slaves continued to rely primarily on self-help. In general, throughout the period of slavery, Barbadian slaves probably depended more on themselves and their own healing specialists than they did on European medicine. Aside from whatever discomfort and mistrust slaves felt for white medical practitioners, they tended not only to rely on self-help, but also to view it as more relevant to their needs.

As with the enslaved throughout New World plantation societies, those in Barbados who survived the very dangerous years of infancy and early childhood developed into adults who suffered from a wide array of ailments and diseases. Africans who survived the Middle Passage and the traumas of adjusting to the plantation regimen suffered likewise. No slave settlement was exempt from health problems (Handler 1997a). Many ailments and disorders, if they did not kill, were merely endured, and, as in all human communities, slaves often relied on the body's capacity for healing itself without medical intervention. In other cases, however, they attempted to treat their medical problems and relied on the resources of their own communities.

AFRICAN INFLUENCES AND BELIEFS/PRACTICES CONCERNING  
ILLNESS/DEATH

Just as Europeans brought to the New World their ideas and practices relating to illness, including standard procedures in "kitchen physic," "home therapeutics," or "domestic medicine," and tried to adapt these to the conditions they encountered<sup>3</sup> so did the cultural baggage of enslaved Africans include explanations for their maladies and procedures for their treatment even though they could not bring their *materia medica* with them. Despite the enormity and cultural diversity of West Africa its traditional systems of medicine shared some broad characteristics.

These systems incorporated naturalistic or physical components in theories of causation and treatment; of more fundamental significance they intimately linked views of health and medicine with beliefs in the supernatural. A strong relationship between illness and supernatural forces is a widely held belief in folk or "tribal" societies. This belief is still held by many people in the modern, industrialized world and was prevalent in pre-industrial Europe. In seventeenth-century England, for example, among the many broad parallels with West African cultures, astrology, providence, sin, and witchcraft "were all legitimate points of reference in the interpretation of disease" (Feierman 1979:277, 279; cf. Hill 1974:158; Gottfried 1986). Magic was included in the diagnostic and therapeutic methods of early English physicians as well as folk healers and was "to one degree or another ... an integral part of the healing process" (Gottfried 1986:177, 179-80). The belief in witchcraft also characterized English society in earlier periods, and not until the late 1600s was witchcraft officially banned as an explanation for misfortune (Gluckman 1955:106; Feierman 1979:279).

In fact, in efforts to communicate with a British audience, early writers in Barbados would indicate that witchcraft or sorcery produced the same kinds of "symptoms" on slaves as on those Europeans, in the words of John Brathwaite, a wealthy eighteenth-century planter, "with weak and superstitious minds ... when sudden but vast painful affections of the mind are brought on."<sup>4</sup> Thomas Walduck, an English army officer stationed at Barbados during the early eighteenth century, reported the prevalence of sorcery/witchcraft on the island. He wrote how "white men, overseers of plantations and masters have been forced to leave this island by being bewitched by the Negros."<sup>5</sup> His comment implicitly underscored how

3. E.g., Dunn 1972:309-11; Puckrein 1979; Kupperman 1984; Sheridan 1985:74-77 and *passim*.

4. House of Commons (HofC), London, Parliamentary Papers (PP), 26, 1789, part 3, John Brathwaite, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa.

5. British Library (BL), London, Sloane Manuscripts 2302, Letters from Thomas Walduck to James Petiver, November 1710-September 1712.

Africans and Europeans shared a general belief in the efficacy of evil magic (and how such magic could be used by slaves as a weapon against slave-masters or other whites). Witchcraft, however, was not part of generally accepted European religious orthodoxy or tradition, while in African cultures it was an essential feature of "the accepted body of religious and moral ideas" (Mair 1969:181, 183).

Fundamental to the link between illness and the supernatural in African cultures was the notion that major misfortunes of life such as disease, serious physical trauma, and death, were often (if not always in many cultures) the result of supernatural forces. In many cases, every-day trivial complaints, such as indigestion, diarrhea, or mild headaches, may have been given naturalistic explanations. Even though natural causes were sometimes considered or sought, major illness or death were generally caused by specific agents; for example, acts of god or gods, malevolent spirits, the breaking of religious rules or taboos, the displeasure of ancestral spirits, and evil magic. Witchcraft/sorcery, in particular, was frequently (though perhaps not universally) invoked to explain fatalities and very serious illness and disease.<sup>6</sup>

Traditional African healers make "little distinction between body, mind, and spirit, in curing – the whole person is treated ... a person's social and spiritual milieu may be 'treated' through rituals in order to restore the balance between the various elements deemed necessary for total health" (Green 1980:491-92; cf. Augé 1985:2; Iwu 1988:15,10). Africans transported to the New World undoubtedly shared such holistic views, and there is every indication that major dimensions of West African conceptions of disease, illness, and serious misfortune were perpetuated in Barbados.

Major etiological beliefs of Barbadian slaves were broadly identical to those of many West African peoples. In particular, the strong African belief "in spiritual causation of diseases and death" (Iwu 1988:12) was transported to the New World in the minds of enslaved Africans. "There are but few Negroes," observed the knowledgeable Griffith Hughes (1750:15) in the 1740s, when many Barbadian slaves were creoles, "who believe that they die a natural death." Around the same period an English visitor learned of "many instances ... of Negroes dying" by believing themselves bewitched. Despite the efforts of white doctors to revive them, "they get a notion they must die, and this notion they absolutely retain to their death" (Poole 1753:300-1). About forty years later, when the great majority of slaves were creoles, Barbados' Governor David Parry reported that "even the better sort amongst them almost universally believe in witchcraft, and are so firmly persuaded of its effects ... [that] many of them despond and die when they

6. E.g., Horton 1967:53-54; Gillies 1976:358-95; Feierman 1979:278; Maier 1979:80; Iwu 1988:17; Jacobson-Widding & Westerlund 1989.

conceive themselves bewitched.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, he shared the views of many whites in maintaining that witchcraft or sorcery were significant causes of slave mortality. During the early nineteenth century, whites continued to link “many” slave deaths and injuries to witchcraft/sorcery.<sup>8</sup> They certainly naively simplified what was a more complex etiological system and were more concerned to publicize and emphasize the negative, evil, or anti-social aspects of the slaves’ belief and medicinal system.

The African cultural background not only influenced and informed the etiological *beliefs* of Barbadian slaves, but also their early healing *practices*, and Africans who came to the New World also would have attempted to adapt their holistic and spiritualistic healing practices to the milieu of plantation slavery. It is clear that slaves were treating themselves from the earliest period of slavery. Although many of the African-born, especially younger ones, probably lacked experience with healing practices in their homelands, others would have brought African techniques for treating ailments known in Africa as well as specific procedures for the diagnosis of illness. Slaves had techniques for treating common problems, such as the extraction of the very lengthy “Guinea worm” and the removal of body lice. They also had techniques (perhaps influenced by Amerindian practices [Handler 1970]) for removing the egg sacs of the omnipresent chigger, whose wounds could be a pathfinder for tetanus and other infections. Barbadian slaves used rum and rum mixtures for various medicinal purposes, and “Barbadoes green tar,” a natural petroleum hydrocarbon found in the island’s Scotland district, was employed for gastrointestinal disorders, muscular aches and bruises, and fresh wounds.<sup>9</sup>

7. HofC, PP, 26, 1789, Extract of a Letter from Governor Parry to the Right Honourable Lord Sydney, August 18, 1788; Cf. part 3, John Brathwaite, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa.

8. See Public Record Office (PRO), London, Colonial Office (CO), Barbados Assembly and Council, 30/18, no. 262, An Act for the Punishment of Such Slaves as Shall be Found Practising Obeah, November 4, 1806; 30/20, no. 367, An Act for the Better Prevention of the Practise of Obeah, June 28, 1818; 30/20, no. 383, An Act for the Better Prevention of the Practise of Obeah, May 26, 1819; 28/87, A Case for the Opinion of His Majesty’s Crown Lawyers [concerning the Obeah Trial of Jack, a Slave] December 21, 1818; University of Keele Library, Staffordshire, UK, Raymond Richards Collection of Miscellaneous Historical Material, Minute Book, Society for the Improvement of West India Plantership, June 1, 1811-April 6, 1816.

9. Specific curing treatments, involving natural, mainly herbal, medicines, that were used by Barbados slaves are mentioned in a number of sources (Handler & Jacoby 1993; Handler 1997a). Some slaves, apparently following West African methods, may have inoculated themselves against leprosy or yaws (two diseases often confused with each other in the primary sources). At an early period, bleeding, lancing, and cupping, which were fairly widespread in West African medicine, also may have been employed in Barbados. Cupping is widespread in Afro-Caribbean folk medicine and is still practiced by Maroons in Jamaica and Suriname, “exactly as described by Sloane” (Sloane 1707:liiii-liv; Kenneth Bilby, personal communication; cf. Laguerre 1987:30).

The pharmacopoeia that developed, however, was overwhelmingly composed of plant medicines. Both African and European migrants to Barbados, and to other areas of the New World, shared a cultural predisposition to exploit and experiment with the natural, particularly the plant, environment. Like Europeans, Africans who increasingly poured into Barbados during the 1600s and early 1700s were accustomed to employing herbal medicines. Moreover, these immigrants undoubtedly included a variety of male and female healers with skills in the preparation of such medicines. British doctors in Barbados, who themselves laid great emphasis on the curative powers of plants, knew that slaves possessed a herbal pharmacopoeia. "The Negroes," reported Richard Towne (1726:182-92), "are great pretenders to the knowledge of specific virtues in simples." A few decades later, William Hillary (1766:341) observed how "the Negroes have by long observation and experience" discovered a way of treating what he called yaws "with the caustic juices of certain escarotic plants" (cf. Handler & Jacoby 1993).

Despite an abundance of general evidence attesting the importance of plant medicines to African and creole slaves, and whites of all social classes (including professional medical practitioners), it is impossible to give a detailed account of the remedies employed by slaves, and how their plant pharmacopoeia changed through time. The sources usually present only limited ethnobotanical information which is frequently ambiguous or silent in identifying plant use by "racial" group. In quite a few cases both slaves and whites probably used the same plants for similar purposes, and this may have increasingly occurred as the slave period progressed and as the island's creole culture and folk-healing tradition became more firmly established. Although slave self-help involved plant medicines for a wide array of ailments, the sources only vaguely indicate specific treatments or medication (Handler & Jacoby 1993).

Whites probably knew few details about the slaves' pharmacopoeia, particularly its ritualistic context. Africans would not have perceived herbal medicines from an entirely or, even in some cases, a partially naturalistic or physical perspective. Probably relatively few early slave medicines, including their ritualistic and symbolic associations, as those in Africa, were "regarded as unambiguously non-magical" (Gillies 1976:381). Moreover, West Africans often believed that herbal medicines could be directed only against the symptoms of an illness, and that its underlying cause (defined in what contemporary Europeans would consider a supernatural idiom) would not be removed until ritualistic measures were taken to restore normalcy.

In common with West Africans and other human communities, Barbadian slaves probably shared a certain amount of general herbal knowledge among themselves, although individuals may have had their own favorite recipes for particular ills. Moreover, conventional treatments probably existed for such frequent ailments as headaches, fevers, diarrhea,

and so forth. Like members of all human communities, Barbadian slaves easily recognized very common ailments. Many of these ailments were probably treated by the patient himself or left to the body's own healing powers. Yet, the slave community also contained specialists in the healing arts, or certain people with particular healing skills. These people tended to be consulted in more serious or intractable cases. Like traditional African healers, they usually, if not always, received a fee for their services.<sup>10</sup>

### SLAVE HEALERS: NEGRO DOCTORS AND OBEAH PRACTITIONERS

Black and white medical practitioners confronted the same broad set of problems: they were to identify or diagnose illness and find a cure for what they diagnosed. Although medical knowledge was not the exclusive domain of specialists in either group, some slaves, like some Europeans, claimed to be, or were considered by others, as more adept at curing in general or in treating particular ailments. The African-born fugitive or runaway, Cuffey Smith, for example, "pretends himself a doctor to cure the leprosy," reported an advertisement in the *Barbados Mercury* of August 28, 1784. George Pinckard (1806:388-90), a British military doctor in Barbados during the 1790s, disparaging a number of white creole doctors, opined that "the very Negro doctors of the estates ... justly vie with them in medical knowledge."

As used by Pinckard, however, the meaning of the term Negro doctor is unclear. Nor is its meaning clarified by other contemporary sources. Negro doctor could have referred to males who were assigned to plantation hospitals or sick houses. Such black doctors, or "hothouse doctors," working under the direction of white doctors, sometimes appear in other West Indian territories. However, "hothouse doctors" do not appear in discussions of Barbados plantation medical facilities or on plantation slave occupational lists (Handler 1997a). Although the term Negro doctor in Barbados may have referred to a medical assistant in a plantation hospital, it appears more likely that it was applied to a different type of practitioner. But what kind of practitioner?

In the 1740s, a British doctor in Jamaica claimed that "Negro doctors" succeeded more frequently "in obtaining cures through their use of hot baths of herbs, or fermentations" (Higman 1984:266). Decades later an English naturalist, reporting on Jamaica's medicinal plants, learned that European doctors "know very little of them but I have known very great cures made by the Negro doctors."<sup>11</sup> As in Jamaica, the so-called Negro doc-

10. Obeah persons in contemporary Barbados also work on behalf of clients who pay for their services in cash or trade (Fisher 1985:107, 133).

11. Linnean Society of London Library, Ellis Manuscripts, Letter from John Ellis, July 26, 1772.



tors in Barbados may have been practitioners specializing in natural remedies, particularly herbal medicines, and were part-time healers, responding to particular calls for their services. Pinckard could have been referring to this kind of person. Sparse evidence indicates that some Barbadian plantations (regularly or occasionally?) employed such doctors. For example, in 1731 the Codrington plantations, owned by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, paid five shillings to a "Negro doctor" for "curing a sick slave" of an unidentified malady (Bennett 1958:40).

The primary sources also suggest that the Negro doctor could also be known as an Obeah person and that the meaning of the word Obeah changed over time. The best evidence for this apparent change comes from the late 1780s. John Brathwaite, the planter who sometimes represented the island's commercial interests in Britain, responded to a query from a British Parliamentary committee, "whether Negroes called Obeah-men or under any other denomination, practicing witchcraft, exist in the island of Barbadoes?," by observing that "Negroes *formerly* called Obeah-men, but *now* more commonly called doctors, do exist in Barbados"<sup>12</sup> (emphasis mine).

At certain periods, whites may have occasionally used the terms "Negro doctor" and "Obeah person" interchangeably. Yet, the sparsity of evidence complicates attempts to understand exactly what the term Obeah meant to blacks and whites and how these meanings may have varied over the several centuries of slavery in Barbados. The Barbados sources can be ambiguous and sometimes contradictory. In the late 1780s, for example, Brathwaite reported the existence of Obeah practitioners, but asserted that during the preceding twenty years their "number has diminished greatly."<sup>13</sup> However, at the same time, the Barbados Council maintained "there is hardly an estate in which there is not some old man or woman who affects to possess some supernatural power. These are called Obeah Negroes."<sup>14</sup>

12. HofC, PP, 26, 1789, part 3, John Brathwaite, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa.

13. HofC, PP, 26, 1789, part 3, John Brathwaite, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa.

14. HofC, PP, 26, 1789, part 3, Barbados Council, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa. As elsewhere in the West Indies, Barbadian Obeah practitioners tended to be men, but, aside from the above quotation, there is unequivocal other evidence that women were also Obeah practitioners (e.g., PRO, CO, Barbados Assembly and Council, 30/18, no. 262, An Act for the Punishment of Such Slaves as Shall be Found Practising Obeah, November 4, 1806; 30/20, no. 367, An Act for the Better Prevention of the Practise of Obeah, June 28, 1818; 30/20, no. 383 An Act for the Better Prevention of the Practise of Obeah, May 26, 1819; 28/27, A Case for the Opinion of His Majesty's Crown Lawyers [Concerning the Obeah Trial of Jack, a Slave] December 21, 1818). There is no way of establishing the proportions of each gender at any given time period, and no information on how practices may have varied by the practitioner's sex.

Above all, the practitioners of Obeah, the "Obeah Negroes," were considered to possess "supernatural powers."<sup>15</sup> Slaves stood "much in awe of ... Obeah Negroes," wrote Griffith Hughes (1750:15-16), "these being a sort of physicians and conjurers, who can, as they believe, not only fascinate them [i.e., bewitch or lay them under a spell], but cure them when they are bewitched by others." Several decades later John Brathwaite asserted that Obeah practitioners "act now principally as fortune-tellers. Some of them have knowledge in simples, and can apply them with success in the cure of wounds." He also claimed that with their "knowledge of poisons they would do a great deal of mischief, were they not restrained by their fear of whites."<sup>16</sup> Whether or not "fear" was, in fact, a restraining influence is impossible to ascertain. Nonetheless, whites, and perhaps slaves as well, considered Obeah persons knowledgeable in making poisons from local flora.

Obeah itself – in contrast to the role of Obeah practitioner – is often mentioned in early writings, but nowhere is it defined, and it is impossible to precisely identify the meaning that black Barbadians attached to the word since it was whites who wrote about it. And, over time, what whites wrote tended to stress the anti-social or evil dimensions of what they perceived Obeah to be. As in other areas of the British Caribbean, whites in Barbados, perhaps reflecting to some degree the usage found among the enslaved, used Obeah as a general or catch-all term for the body of supernatural beliefs and related practices that whites considered non-European in origin, not properly religious, and which slaves employed for both socially positive objectives (e.g., curing illness, finding missing property) and for socially negative ones (e.g., causing death or harm). The word Obeah could also refer to dream interpretation, the making and use of herbal medicines and poisons, and the diagnosis of disease. It could also mean a supernatural force as well as a fetish or charm containing that force or made by an Obeah person to achieve particular ends. For example, a British visitor in the late 1740s learned that

15. HofC, PP, 26, 1789, part 3, Barbados Council, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa; cf. David Parry, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa; PRO, CO, Barbados Assembly and Council, 30/18, no. 262, An Act for the Punishment of Such Slaves as Shall be Found Practising Obeah, November 4, 1806.

16. HofC, PP, 26, 1789, part 3, John Brathwaite, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa.

Obeah Negroes ... are supposed ... to have the power of inflicting injury or punishment upon such as attempt to rob their plantation or provision ground; for which purpose they tie together old nails, glass, stones, rags, etc., these being put together and tied in a rag, is called the Obeah, and put upon in their provision-patch, as a warning to those who come there to steal from them, that, at their peril, they forbear taking anything away (Poole 1753:300-1).<sup>17</sup>

Over time, whites increasingly emphasized the socially negative when mentioning Obeah and stressed its "evil characteristics," using the term Obeah for "diabolical superstitions" and related "odious rites" and practices that allegedly involved "communication with the devil and other evil spirits" (Orderson 1842:35). They applied the term to the rituals that slaves conducted over the graves of the dead (Handler & Lange 1978:204-7), and to individuals who claimed any "magical and supernatural charm or power" that could cause injury or death, including the use of poisons.<sup>18</sup> Poison-use, it must be stressed, was not an intrinsic feature of Obeah, and neither the knowledge of poisons nor their application was confined to Obeah practitioners.

The ambiguities and inconsistencies in the Barbados historical sources when the term Obeah is used suggest that there may have been, in fact, several types of slave medical practitioners. These types were not easily recognized by whites who may have uniformly classified under the rubric Obeah what, in fact, slaves recognized as several types of healers. The probable existence of several types of healers in Barbados can be clarified by analogy to the role of traditional healers in colonial-period or contemporary African societies.

Synthesizing reports in the African literature, anthropologist Edward Green distinguishes between "herbalists" and other types of healers, a distinction made by Africans themselves. The *herbalist* learns his craft through an apprenticeship and relies on plant medicines. Although he is relatively "empirical or naturalistic," he "may occasionally practice a little divination ... or other magicoreligious techniques." The herbalist does not practice evil magic, but he may provide protective magic for clients. The *diviner* diagnoses the cause of illness. Occasionally the diviner may use herbal medicines which "are supposed to have spiritual powers," although some types

17. Another mid-eighteenth-century visitor (Thompson 1770:113-4) also reported "a string of rags" in the fields and its connection with Obeah. Similar protective charms were found in eighteenth-century Jamaica (Bilby 1993:5) and were common in West Africa to prevent theft from fields or homes (e.g., Field 1961:111; Parrinder 1961:162; Ellis 1966a:92 and 1966b:118; Talbot 1967:136; Winterbottom 1969; Thomas 1970:60-63).

18. Boston Public Library, Ms. U.1.2, John B. Colthurst, Journal as a Special Magistrate in the Islands of Barbados and Saint Vincent, July 1835-August 1838. For the range of similar meanings attached to the term Obeah in the present-day Anglophone Caribbean, see Allsopp (1996:412) and Bilby (1993).

of diviners may use herbal medicines quite regularly. A third type of healer, the *sorcerer-healer*, may cure illness as well as attempt to cause it. Because he willingly can use magic to cause harm, "the sorcerer-healer tends to elicit emotional ambivalence and even mistrust or fear by at least a portion of the communities he serves ... and tends to be more secretive about his healing knowledge." The sorcerer-healer can be enlisted to counter the evil actions of a witch or sorcerer or to "exorcise an evil spirit that possesses a patient"; sometimes herbal medicines are used as part of the treatment as well.<sup>19</sup>

Whether these several types actually existed in Barbados cannot be definitely established. Yet, when whites referred to Obeah practitioners, on the one hand, as Negro doctors, implying socially beneficial healers, and, on the other, as "a set of miscreants" engaged in "wicked acts" they were indicating several types of slave medical roles.<sup>20</sup> And when divination took place whites may have often confused or badly misunderstood its role in healing.

As noted above, the planter John Brathwaite identified the Obeah practitioner as a "fortune teller"; in so doing, he pointed to divination, a universal human practice and one of fundamental importance to African medicine as well as the self-help system of Barbadian slaves. Virtually no details exist on the practice of divination in Barbados and the instruments used by diviners. Yet, some reasonable inferences can be made from what is known about divination more generally in human societies and particularly in West Africa. Divination allows people to control chance and minimize ambiguity in their lives so that important decisions can be made under favorable circumstances. It also permits finding lost objects or discovering hidden or special knowledge, such as the causes of illness or other types of misfortune. Just as a seventeenth-century English astrologer could advise ship owners about insuring their ships, young women about marital partners, or military leaders on battle plans, so the African diviner could provide reliable predictions, give advice on the conduct of daily life, and reveal past events. The diagnosis of disease is crucial to divination in Africa, and the diviner's immediate objective is to ascertain the cause of the illness and then prescribe appropriate healing rituals and treatment. Since divination is considered so indispen-

19. Green 1980:502-3; cf. Cardinall 1920:46; Parrinder 1961:137; Gelfand 1964:40-54; Meredith 1967:188, 233; Ayensu 1981:88; Iwu 1988:23; Makinde 1988:88-89; Peek 1991:3. Also, Chambers 1997:88-90, for the role of the *ndi obea* or *dibia* of pre-colonial Igboland.

20. HofC, PP, 26, 1789, Extract of a Letter from Governor Parry to the Right Honourable Lord Sydney, August 18, 1788; PRO, CO, Barbados Assembly and Council, 30/18, no. 262, An Act for the Punishment of Such Slaves as Shall be Found Practising Obeah, November 4, 1806; 30/20, no. 367, An Act for the Better Prevention of the Practise of Obeah, June 28, 1818; 30/20, no. 383, An Act for the Better Prevention of the Practise of Obeah, May 26, 1819.

sable in African life, the diviner is considered a social asset and generally enjoys respect and honor within his community.<sup>21</sup>

Divination falls within the larger domain of magic. Among African peoples, as among Barbadian and other Caribbean slaves, an intimate relationship existed between magic and medicine. In its broadest sense, magic is a way of understanding and influencing the natural world or events through the intermediary of the supernatural. Magic assumes that certain objectives cannot be achieved by human action alone, and that the natural world can be influenced or directed by the manipulation of supernatural forces or power. Although magic has its negative or anti-social side, most magic is oriented toward the social good, such as bringing rain or good luck, protecting against evil, and healing illness. The belief system of Barbadian slaves displayed these characteristics of magic, and magical practices were frequently an intrinsic feature of the curing activities of Barbadian practitioners.

Whatever the practices, there were probably slaves in Barbados whose roles were similar to the "herbalists" or "diviners" described above. Such persons were identified as "Negro doctors" in some historical sources and as Obeah persons in others. Some people, called Obeah practitioners in the sources, provided socially beneficial activities, but also engaged in anti-social actions and may have had roles similar to the "sorcerer-healer." In addition, the slave community may have included individuals who were considered neither Negro doctors nor Obeah people, but rather, as in African communities, individuals who were "gifted ordinary people with the secrets to cure some specific intractable disease" (Iwu 1988:26). Cuffey Smith, the fugitive slave described in the *Barbados Mercury* (August 28, 1784), who "pretends himself a doctor to cure the leprosy," may have been such an individual.

There is no information on how people became Obeah practitioners, "Negro doctors," or other types of healers, or how such people learned or developed their skills, and whether some type of apprenticeship system, however informal, existed. In the earliest phases of its development, however, what came to be called Obeah probably emerged from the activities of

21. For divination in Africa and comments that are equally applicable to Barbadian slave life, see, for example, Parrinder 1961:137; Gelfand 1964; Horton 1967:53; Mair 1969:241-44; Feierman 1979:279; Green 1980:499; Iwu 1988:22, 31; Makinde 1988:6-7; Peek 1991:3. A Barbados law imposed a whipping on any slave "pretending to have the power of divination ... or practice what is commonly called fortune telling," including those claiming "to possess the charm or power of discovering or leading to the discovery of any lost or stolen goods, articles, or things" (HofC, PP, 25 [1826-27] Barbados Assembly and Council, An Act to Repeal Several Acts and Clauses of Acts Respecting Slaves, clause 38, October 1826). Theft of crops from plantation fields or the small gardens cultivated by slaves was common, and it can be inferred from this law that slave diviners were employed to find stolen goods. African diviners were commonly called upon to locate lost objects or livestock or to discover thieves (Iwu 1988:23).

various types of African healers, or people who were apprenticing to be healers before they were captured. They came from various ethno-linguistic groups and applied their knowledge and traditions as best they could in the New World. In the early eighteenth century, Thomas Walduck, referring to Obeah practitioners, wrote that "no Negro that was born in Barbados can do anything of this, only those that are brought from the coast of Africa,"<sup>22</sup> and by the mid-1700s, when Barbados had many more creole slaves, Africans continued to be prominent among Obeah persons. However, by the late 1780s, when most slaves – perhaps as many as 86 percent – were creoles, Obeah "professors are as often natives as Africans."<sup>23</sup> As time passed and as the slave trade brought fewer Africans to Barbados, creole slaves came to predominate; ultimately all Obeah people were Barbados-born. In 1818, for example, when the legislature passed a new anti-Obeah law, only about 7 percent of Barbadian slaves were born in Africa and one must assume that at this time most Obeah people were creoles.<sup>24</sup> By this period, whites viewed Obeah entirely in negative terms; it was considered among the most "heinous and grievous crimes."<sup>25</sup>

#### THE OBEAH PRACTITIONER

"Of their arts," reported the Barbados Council, "we know nothing."<sup>26</sup> Concurring, Brathwaite stressed that Obeah practitioners "take care to keep secret their supposed art, particularly from the whites."<sup>27</sup> In earlier years, Dr. William Hillary (1766:341) had also reported that slave healers in general kept "secret from the white people" a treatment they had for yaws, "but preserve [it] among themselves by tradition." African healers often keep their rituals and medical ingredients to themselves and do "not reveal their

22. BL, Sloane Manuscripts 2302, Letters from Thomas Walduck to James Petiver, November 1710-September 1712.

23. HofC, PP, 26, 1789, part 3, Barbados Council, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa; cf. John Brathwaite, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa; Handler & Lange 1978:29.

24. PRO, CO, Barbados Assembly and Council, 30/20, no. 367, An Act for the Better Prevention of the Practise of Obeah, June 28, 1818; Barbados 28/26, An Abstract Account of the Slave Population of this Island, Taken from the Registration Books, October 31, 1817.

25. PRO, CO, 28/87, Letter from Governor Combermere to Lord Bathurst [Concerning the Obeah Trial of Jack, a Slave] December 28, 1818.

26. HofC, PP, 26, 1789, part 3, Barbados Council, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa.

27. HofC, PP, 26, part 3, John Brathwaite, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa.

secrets to anyone" (Makinde 1988:91; cf. Iwu 1988:13). While Obeah practitioners in Barbados (as elsewhere in the Caribbean; cf. Frey & Wood 1998:57-58) were probably following a basically African pattern in their secrecy, this pattern was surely strengthened by the conditions of plantation slavery, the highly negative way in which whites viewed Obeah (including the laws passed against it), and the general alienation of slaves from whites. In any case, throughout Barbadian history undoubtedly very few whites actually witnessed the Obeah practitioner at work, and this may partially explain the confusion in the sources.

Thomas Walduck, however, claims to have observed the practice of Obeah. "Some of ye Negroes are a sort of magician," he wrote, "and I have seen suprizing things done by them ... their manner of bewitching is the same we read of in books, by having images of clay, wax, dust," and then inserting into these

pins, old iron, tobacco pipes in several parts according as they design to grieve the patient; strings tied about the image's forehead, the middle joints, and other parts. Basket[s]ful of such triumphery I have took away from them upon searching their houses and burnt them.<sup>28</sup>

In this passage, Walduck is not only alluding to imitative magic (i.e., "like produces like"), but also is describing the work of a type of African healer, perhaps a diviner or "sorcerer-healer," in any case one who anthropologists would call a shaman. As a part-time religious specialist, the shaman is primarily involved in the diagnosis and cure of illness although he sometimes causes illness as well. When Hughes described Obeah practitioners as being "physicians and conjurers" who can "fascinate" or bewitch slaves as well as cure them he was also implying a shaman-type role. Some of the practices Walduck describes or alludes to, and which neither he nor Hughes appear to have fully understood, are strongly reminiscent of West African practices. To help cure or prevent illness, West African healers use a wide array of common-place objects, such as eggshells, seeds, feathers, shells, iron, herbs and roots, clay, wax, string, and animal bones; in some cases, tying knots in string or cutting string in pieces is associated with evil. The objects used by healers are the "magical apparatus" that control or contain the supernatural force that is believed to actually perform the desired cure.<sup>29</sup>

In the mid-eighteenth century, Hughes (1750:15) observed how Barbadian slaves "are very tenaciously addicted to the rites, ceremonies,

28. BL, Sloane Manuscripts 2302, Letters from Thomas Walduck to James Petiver, November 1710-September 1712.

29. Field 1961:111, 120, 128; cf. Cardinall 1920:49; Rattray 1927:46 and 1932:314-16; Parrinder 1961:157, 161; Kingsley 1964:144.

and superstitions of their own countries"; even the creoles, he stressed, "cannot be intirely weaned from these customs." To illustrate, Hughes emphasized the influence of Obeah practitioners and what he perceived as the gullibility of their patients. He provides a relatively rich description of a practitioner who attempted to cure a "Negro woman" troubled by "rheumatic pains." In this description, Hughes supplies a clear example of African-derived medicinal beliefs and practices:

The woman was persuaded by one of these Obeah doctors, that she was bewitched, and that these pains were owing to several pieces of glass, rusty nails, and splinters of sharp stones, that were lodged in the different parts of her body; adding, that it was in his power, if paid for it to cure her, by extracting these from her through the navel. Upon the payment of the stipulated praemium, he produced his magical apparatus, being two earthen basons, a handful of different kinds of leaves, and a piece of soap. In one of these basons he made a strong lather, in the other he put the bruised herbs; then clapping these with one hand to the navel, and pouring the suds by degrees upon them, he stroked the parts most affected with the other hand, always ending towards the navel.<sup>[30]</sup> In a short time after, thrusting his finger and thumb into the cataplasma of herbs, he produced several pieces of broken glass, nails and splinters of stones (which he had before artfully conveyed among the bruised herbs).

In a similar vein, several decades earlier Walduck reported how he had

knowne upon Negros complaining that they are bewitched an Obia Negro hath taken out of their eyes bones, shells out of their thighs, pieces of iron out of their bellys, and such odd things out of other parts that I have admired at it, but by what legerdemain I could never discover, having been careful to search them before.<sup>31</sup>

And during the late 1750s a visiting British naval officer learned of similar practices from a Barbadian physician who had "many African Negroes brought to him in the hypocondriack state which neither medicine nor advice could palliate." In such cases, the physician "had no other recourse" and would send

30. Here, the Obeah man is following a West African practice of "washing away sickness" (Field 1961:122; cf., for example, Little 1951:234-35; Winterbottom 1969: 25, 223).

31. BL, Sloane Manuscripts 2302, Letters from Thomas Walduck to James Petiver, November 1710-September 1712.



for a Negro priest who would persuade the patient, after having exercised a number of legerdemain tricks, that he had extracted toads, serpents and birds from his body, which being concealed about him he produces them at pleasure; after such an operation, you'll see the superstitious wretch revive, and in a few days, return in spirits to his labour (Thompson 1770:113-14).

The naval officer implied that the "Negro priests" were charlatans, and was certain that their patients were "superstitious." Hughes, too, had no doubt about the chicanery of Obeah people and the credulousness of those who patronized them. In fact, Hughes related the story of the rheumatoid slave woman to illustrate how "Obeah Negroes get a good livelihood by the folly and ignorance of the rest of the Negroes." Some Obeah practitioners in Barbados, like some traditional healers in Africa, may have been "unscrupulous opportunists" who unethically profited from their patients by "promising cures for any affliction" (Green 1980:501). The Obeah man described by Hughes may have been such a person. However, it is just as likely, if not more so, that he was merely engaging in actions not understood by Hughes or other white contemporaries, and that are common among African healers (as well as shamans in other parts of the world), that is, providing "manipulative treatment by which material objects are believed to be extracted from the body of the patient" (Royal Anthropological Institute 1954:190). European criticisms of traditional healers in contemporary Africa for engaging in "mumbo-jumbo incantations" and "hocus pocus" (Iwu 1988:9; cf. Meredith 1967:234; Mair 1969:246-48) are similar to white criticisms of slave healers in Barbados. Yet, based on a fundamental premise of holistic healing wherein "both psychosomatic and somatic dimensions of health are important," for the African healer "what is perhaps as important as objective symptom removal is that the patient *thinks* that he is better" (Green 1980:493; emphasis in original). "The patient's mind and soul as well as body are considered together during treatment," writes the Nigerian physician Maurice Iwu (1988:11), and cures can be achieved because of the "personality of the physician, his power of persuasion and the faith the patient has in his treatment."

#### EVIL MAGIC: WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY

Because Barbadian slaves, as with Africans in Africa, profoundly believed that misfortune was caused primarily by supernatural forces that acted through human agents, evil magic was a major factor in their lives. Evil magic falls into two broad and related categories, traditionally called by many anthropologists witchcraft and sorcery. The distinction between these

categories is often not clear cut in actual practice and is not universally accepted by anthropologists.<sup>32</sup> However, for purposes of this paper and because of its reliance on often sparse historical data the distinction is loosely followed to direct attention to certain characteristics of Obeah. In sorcery, magic is consciously and knowingly performed to injure others. Sorcerers acquire their magical knowledge through learning; theoretically their techniques can be carried out by anyone with the requisite knowledge and skill. It is important to emphasize that in sorcery, like socially beneficial magic, there is actual performance, such as rituals, recitation of spells, and, particularly, the use and manipulation of material objects or substances. The negative powers that whites in Barbados often ascribed to Obeah practitioners and sometimes identified as "witchcraft" in the sources could be more appropriately labelled as sorcery.

The power of the witch is usually, although not always, inborn or inherited. This power cannot be learned; it resides within the individual and is directed against others for evil purposes. It is frequently believed that "the witch need merely wish to harm his victim and his witchcraft then does this, or it may be enough for him to merely feel annoyance or jealousy against someone for the power to set itself in operation without his being aware of the fact that it has done so."<sup>33</sup> Witchcraft, then, is a psychic or mental act whose believers affirm that the harmful power of the witch is unleashed merely through the activation of certain negative thoughts.

Anthropological discussions of African witchcraft/sorcery shed light on at least some Barbadian Obeah practitioners and believers in a way that naive and ethnocentric contemporary white observers in Barbados could not. Following the classic study of witchcraft by E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1957), Max Gluckman (1955:103-4) observes how in African societies

witches are believed to cause illness by shooting objects into their victim; the doctor should extract these objects to effect a cure. Of course, doctors produce these objects by sleight of hand in poultices or by concealing them in their mouths. But not even the doctor doubts the belief as such. He regrets only that he does not possess the magic ... to enable him really to extract the noxious object. Meantime, he has to pretend to do this extraction for that peace of mind of the patient which is necessary for recovery.

Europeans often branded such African medical practitioners "charlatans exploiting a credulous population," writes Lucy Mair (1969:246-48), but "their function in providing an explanation of the sickness is far more important than this supposedly curative action. Even more significant is the

32. For a classic argument against this distinction, see Turner 1964; also, for example, Geschiere 1997:225n1, 230n32.

33. Middleton & Winter 1963:3, 8, 12; cf. Royal Anthropological Institute 1954:188-89; Mair 1969:245.

reflection that people cannot do without a recourse of some kind in difficulties for which they know no technical solution." Sorcery and witchcraft help explain injury, bad luck, and illness, and witchcraft beliefs, in particular, account for specific types of misfortune which are not felt to have come about simply by chance or coincidence. Witchcraft "is concerned with the singularity of misfortune"; it "does not explain the whole of any misfortune. Every misfortune has its empirical side." As a "theory of causation" witchcraft does not deny, for example, that people can become ill from eating certain foods, "but it explains why some of them fall ill at some times and not at other times" (Gluckman 1955:83-85, 92; cf. Middleton & Winter 1963:10, 20; Mbiti 1969:261-62).

Not only does African witchcraft explain certain types of misfortune, it also points to categories of people who might be witches. These persons are universally despised, and it is a commonplace anthropological observation that Africans regard a witch as being everything a good person should not be. Misfortunes can be attributed to these persons, and the search for the witch, or the witchhunt, becomes an important process in societies with witchcraft beliefs. Not only do accusations of witchcraft/sorcery reflect tensions in social relationships, but accusations and witchcraft beliefs in general "are the source of many disharmonies and quarrels" within small communities (Gluckman 1955:100-1); they can be "an aggravator of all hostilities and fears [and] an obstacle to peaceful cooperation."<sup>34</sup>

Barbadian slaves were certainly vulnerable to illness and various types of misfortune, to say nothing of the system that enslaved them and which circumscribed, stressed, and constrained their daily lives. Moreover, the tensions and antagonisms within plantation communities were manifest in interpersonal conflicts, such as accusations of theft or fights and stabbings (Handler 1997c), and were reflected in several early-nineteenth-century laws making Obeah a capital offense. These laws attributed a large number of slave deaths, serious illness, and injuries to the evil powers of Obeah practitioners and surely reflected to some extent information transmitted by slaves themselves.<sup>35</sup>

34. Douglas 1963:141; cf., Marwick 1963:3; Middleton & Winter 1963:20-21; Kennedy 1969; Edgerton 1992:71-72, 172.

35. PRO, CO, Barbados Assembly and Council, 30/18, no. 262, An Act for the Punishment of Such Slaves as Shall be Found Practising Obeah, November 4, 1806; 30/20, no. 367, An Act for the Better Prevention of the Practise of Obeah, June 28, 1818; 30/20, no. 383, An Act for the Better Prevention of the Practise of Obeah, May 26, 1819; HofC, PP 25, An Act to Repeal Several Acts and Clauses of Acts Respecting Slaves, October 1826. The earliest anti-Obeah law was passed in 1806. Justifying the need for this law, Barbados' governor reported that although "Obeah has existed time out of mind" in Barbados, it "was never considered a crime which could be punished by any existing law ... and it was thought necessary to pass an act for the punishment of it" (PRO, CO 28/87, A Case for the Opinion of His Majesty's Crown Lawyers [Concerning the Obeah Trial of Jack, a Slave], December 21, 1818). The Barbadian historian Karl

Although sorcery/witchcraft was undeniably a component of Obeah, as the system developed over time whites greatly exaggerated its anti-social dimensions and minimized its positive functions in the slave community. Walduck, in alluding to the curative powers of Obeah (see above) also pointed to its negative aspects. "That one Negro can bewitch another (Obia as they call it)," he wrote, "every day makes appear [sic] ... [and] that one Negro can torment another is beyond doubt, by sending an unaccountable pains [sic] in different parts of their body, lameness, madness, loss of speech, lose the use of all their limbs without any paine."<sup>36</sup> Some twenty years later, Arthur Holt, the Anglican rector of Christ Church parish, reflecting the view of many whites, reported that

the Oby Negroes, or conjurers, are the leaders to whom the others are in slavery for fear of being bewitched, from whom they often receive charms to make them successful in any vilanies, and to get deadly doses to dispatch out of the world such masters or other persons as they have conceived a dislike of."<sup>37</sup>

Whites continued to view Obeah in entirely negative terms throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>38</sup> By the early nineteenth century, when anti-Obeah laws had been passed in some other areas of the British Caribbean,<sup>39</sup> and when Barbados' Governor Combermere reported that Obeah was "a growing evil" on the island, the Barbados legislature for the first time made Obeah a major felony, punishable by death if it caused the death of any slave, or transportation from the island if poison was administered to a slave that did not result in death. The law asserted that "many slaves have lost their lives or have otherwise been materially injured in their health by the wicked acts ... of Obeahmen and women pretending to have communi-

Watson (1979: 88, 97n.107) errs when he says this law replaced one enacted in the eighteenth century; in any event, I can find no trace of this earlier law, and Watson's source citation is inadequate for corroboration. For the relationship between Obeah beliefs (conceived of in terms of malevolent forces) and tensions in contemporary Barbadian villages, see Fisher 1985:114-21.

36. BL, Sloane Manuscripts 2302, Letters from Thomas Walduck to James Petiver, November 1710-September 1712.

37. Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Archives, London, Letter Books, Series B, vol. 6, 62, Letter from Arthur Holt to Henry Newman, February 18, 1729.

38. E.g., Hughes 1750:15-16; Duke 1786:12-13; HofC, PP, 26, 1789, part 3, David Parry, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of Trade to Africa; Barbados Council, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of Trade to Africa, 1789.

39. Sheridan 1985:78-79; PRO, CO 28/87, Letter from Governor Combermere to Lord Bathurst [Concerning the Obeah Trial of Jack, a Slave], December 28, 1818.

cation with the devil and other evil spirits.”<sup>40</sup> Another law, passed twelve years later because the earlier one was “ineffectual,” attempted to more rigorously penalize those who would “injure and affect the life or health of any other person.” Under the major 1826 “slave consolidation act,” the “wicked and unlawful practice of Obeah” continued as a major felony and poison was still mentioned as a characteristic of the Obeah practitioner.<sup>41</sup> Despite these laws, slave deaths continued to be attributed to Obeah. As late as 1830, just several years before emancipation and when virtually every Barbadian slave was born on the island, one planter consoled another at the “loss of your two men from Obeah.”<sup>42</sup>

Social science and medical literature has well established that a person who deeply believes that he or she is the object of a sorcerer’s or witch’s spell, curse, or other action can acquire “an incapacitating anxiety which, if not relieved, can manifest physical symptoms”; “fear makes the victim psychologically vulnerable, and this in turn affects physical health” with physiological changes ultimately leading to illness or death (Davis 1988:198-207; cf. Kennedy 1969:175-76). Barbadian slaves, heavily influenced by their African backgrounds and profound beliefs in witchcraft /sorcery also succumbed to evil magic and displayed symptoms that conformed to the wider pattern of psychogenic illness. For example, Robert Poole (1753:300-1) an English doctor who visited Barbados for about three months in the late 1740s, learned that “Obeah men have had a sort of bewitching power, in inflicting injuries upon others.” He describes two cases in which slaves succumbed to psychogenic illness.<sup>43</sup> Around the same time, Hughes (1750:16) observed how “once a Negro believes that he is

40. PRO, CO 28/87, A Case for the Opinion of His Majesty’s Crown Lawyers [Concerning the Obeah Trial of Jack, a Slave], December 21, 1818.

41. PRO, CO 30/18, no.262, An Act for the Punishment of Such Slaves as Shall be Found Practising Obeah, November 4, 1806; 30/20, no. 367, An Act for the Better Prevention of the Practise of Obeah, June 28, 1818; HofC, PP, 25, An Act to Repeal Several Acts and Clauses of Acts Respecting Slaves, October 1826.

42. National Westminster Bank, London, Charles Cave’s Letter Book, 1815-1836, Letter to L.J. Cumberbatch, April 22, 1830.

43. In the first case a “young Negro woman” accidentally stepped in a puddle of water near the provision ground or garden of an alleged Obeah man. The water (or something in it?) had been magically treated and was intended to harm a slave man on the plantation who was suspected of stealing from the provision ground. Upon stepping in the water, the woman “was taken with a sudden disorder in a manner she could not describe, but ... she felt as tho her soul was going from her.” Growing worse, the woman returned home, and a white doctor was called. She could only give “an imperfect account” of her ailment, repeating that when she stepped into the water “she immediately felt her heart sink in her, and partly die away.” Medical care and treatment went to “no purpose, for tho’ healthy and strong before, yet she wasted away extremely fast and died” (Poole 1753:300-1). (That a person could inadvertently become the victim of evil magic intended for someone else has been reported for West Africa [e.g., Field 1977:123].)

bewitched, the notion is so strongly riveted in his mind, that medicines seldom availing, he usually lingers till death puts an end to his fears." John Brathwaite characterized Obeah victims by their "loss of appetite, great listlessness, languor and debility ... declaring frequently that they are bewitched, and going moping about all day long; hence obstructions, swellings of the extremities, tympany, death."<sup>44</sup>

Whatever the actual clinical symptoms and etiology, the number of deaths and injuries attributed to Obeah is impossible to quantify. Poisoning appears to have accounted for some of these deaths, but without question Obeah also killed or injured through psychosomatic processes. Thus, fear, although perhaps not on as massive a scale as whites claimed, must have played a role in the influence held by *some* Obeah practitioners. In this sense, then, they would have conformed to a more general pattern found in many traditional healing systems. Since such systems often involve "considerable management of supernatural forces," a widespread, albeit realistic, fear exists that healers who are able to control supernatural forces through their own private efforts "may use such potent forces for antisocial as well as helpful purposes" (Rubel & Hass 1990:126-27).<sup>45</sup>

The second case involved "a very strong, able, good Negro." This man "began to grow thin, and fail in his stomach." When his master inquired of his condition, the slave could only say that "he must die," but offered no reason why. The slave grew worse. Concerned about losing such valuable property, the master insisted the slave provide details, giving his assurance that if he had stolen anything the master would make restitution. At first the slave denied theft, but then admitted having "taken something from an Obeah man's ground; that he saw the Obeah after he had taken what he did, and he was sure he should die." The same master owned the Obeah man, and asked him what he had put in his provision ground. Although denying that he had placed any charms or other magical objects, the Obeah man nonetheless complained that vegetables had been stolen from his field. The master insisted the Obeah man had done something to make his slave ill, and brought the slave and the Obeah man together. Threatening to hang the latter should the sick slave die, the master insisted that the Obeah man "use his utmost endeavors to recover the other." The master left the two slaves alone, and although he could not learn what the Obeah man did, "to his great joy and satisfaction, ... his Negro again recovered." For psychogenic illness or death in West Africa, see, for example, Connolly 1896:149-50; Field 1961:115,159; Parrinder 1961:169; Kingsley 1964:137-38; Talbot 1967:138.

44. HofC, PP, 26, 1789, part 3, John Brathwaite, Replies to Queries in Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council ... Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa.

45. Given such beliefs, the ritualistic power of some Obeahmen could be translated into political leadership and resistance to/aggression against white authority – surely one major reason why whites found Obeah so objectionable and threatening. Throughout the West Indies, Obeahmen were alleged to have prominent roles in slave revolts and conspiracies, and, especially in the earlier periods, those dominated by Akan speakers from the Gold Coast; in Barbados, such may have been the case in an aborted plot in 1675 (Schuler 1970:16-17; Handler 1982:16; Gaspar 1985:246-49; Bilby 1993:6; cf. Richardson 1997, for the impact of Obeah and revolts on British literature in the eighteenth century).

## OBEAH PRACTITIONERS AND HEALERS IN THE SLAVE COMMUNITY

Although certain Obeah practitioners were held capable of seriously injuring people or causing their deaths, these same practitioners could withdraw spells to make people feel better. In one of the cases reported by Poole the same Obeahman accused of inflicting harm was called upon to cure his alleged victim, and Walduck emphatically reported "that one (Obia) Witchnegro can cure another is believed here as our country folk doe in England."<sup>46</sup> These comments reflect a widespread feature in magico-religious medical systems such as were found in Africa and among Barbadian slaves: the person who knows how to cure an illness can also cause that same illness. Such a person can exert great power in his community. Although there is little information on the specific influences that Obeah people had in their plantation settlements, it is difficult to accept that their influence was based solely on intimidation and fear, as contemporary white writers claimed, any more than Obeah was a system that was entirely or primarily anti-social, as plantation authorities and whites in general almost universally stressed.

Despite how much whites emphasized Obeah's anti-social aspects, Obeah practitioners, some of whom may have been identified as "Negro doctors" at certain periods, played positive roles within the black community. They were sought for their divination abilities, proficiency at diagnosing and healing illness, finding missing property, and their powers to help avenge wrongs, *including those inflicted by slavemasters*. Very importantly, slaves consulted Obeah practitioners to protect them "from any evils that might otherwise happen."<sup>47</sup> Obeah persons, like African medicine men, prepared charms or amulets that could protect against illness or harm, ward off evil, bring good luck, or protect against theft of crops or personal belongings. Obeah people could counter the effects of sorcery/witchcraft,

After Barbados' one major slave revolt in 1816, and based on what was heard on the island about slave plots and revolts elsewhere in the Caribbean, an 1818 anti-Obeah law provided that Obeah practitioners who used their powers to "promote" slave rebellion were to be executed or transported from the island. An 1806 law, Governor Combermere reported, failed to include "cases where Obeah men or women might use the influence of their art, for the promotion of insurrection and rebellion" (PRO, CO 28/87, A Case for the Opinion of His Majesty's Crown Lawyers [Concerning the Obeah Trial of Jack, a Slave], December 21, 1818.). There is no evidence, however, that Obeah people had leadership roles or participated in the 1816 revolt (Beckles 1987:97).

46. BL, Sloane Manuscripts 2302, Letters from Thomas Walduck to James Petiver, November 1710-September 1712.

47. PRO, CO, Barbados Assembly and Council, 30/18, no. 262, An Act for the Punishment of Such Slaves as Shall be Found Practising Obeah, November 4, 1806.

perhaps even immunize people against these evil practices, and cure the physical disorders and psychological states or moods intimately linked to beliefs in witchcraft/sorcery. Not all Obeah people could do all of the above, and different practitioners may have specialized in one or more functions – as occurs in West Africa – but such details are lacking in the sources.

In African communities, the healer or medicine man was highly respected (e.g., Gelfand 1964:47; Iwu 1988:12; Makinde 1988:6-7). Because many Barbadian “Negro doctors” and “Obeah Negroes,” the “Negro priests” referred to by one British visitor (Thompson 1770:113-14), had access to supernatural forces, could make people feel better, and sometimes cause harm, they were important and influential members of the slave community. In the antebellum American South, as described by Raboteau (1978:33, 276), the position of the conjurer (who had “extensive knowledge” of magic and herbal medicine) seems to fit very closely the position held by the Obeah person in Barbadian slave communities: “The conjurer, as a man of power – and supernatural power at that – enjoyed a measure of authority in the slave community directly proportional to belief in his power ... he was respected and feared by those blacks and whites who had implicit faith in his power.” How Barbadian slaves allocated prestige to different types of healers, however, cannot be ascertained, although archaeological evidence from a slave cemetery suggests that certain types of supernatural specialists were accorded special burials that reflected the esteem in which they were held by the slave community.<sup>48</sup>

For the entirety of the slave period, most Barbadian slaves probably felt far more comfortable with their own healers than with white/European medical practitioners. In any case, the latter did not become significantly involved with slave medical treatment until fairly late in the slave period, during the late 1700s and early 1800s, and then usually only in the most sporadic and superficial way (Handler 1997a). Although there is no direct evidence on how slaves viewed white medical practitioners, there certainly was a great social distance between black and white, unlike the proximate relationship slaves had with their own healers. The latter shared the slaves’ experiences and problems, and thus were in a better position to understand in the slaves’ own cultural idiom what ailed them and what to do about such ailments. Contemporary rural Africans prefer traditional healers to European-trained doctors for similar reasons. The attitude of Barbadian slaves also probably generally resembled the uneasiness many working-class and poor Englishmen felt toward their own medical profession in earlier centuries (Hill 1974:166; Makinde 1988:103). For slaves, this distance

48. Handler 1997b. Another, albeit quite different, burial excavated from the same plantation cemetery may have been that of a witch or sorceress. If so, it provides a unique New World archaeological example of how African customs relating to negative magic and witchcraft were also manifest in mortuary behavior (Handler 1996).



probably involved feelings of discomfort and alienation, even suspicion and mistrust of the white people whose healing abilities, on balance, were probably no better, or in many cases even worse, than what the slave community provided for itself.

### CONCLUSION

The New World environment, including the socio-psychological stress of the slave system and plantation life as well as the pervasiveness of illness and disease, was conducive to the continuation of African-derived etiological beliefs and medical practices. African cultural influences undeniably shaped and heavily influenced the development of slave medicine in Barbados. What was called Obeah formed part of this medical complex even though Europeans who wrote about it often confused and misunderstood many of its features. For whites, Obeah became a catchall term for a range of supernatural-related behaviors that were not of European origin. Whatever beliefs and practices they included in the term Obeah, for the enslaved in Barbados (as elsewhere in the British Caribbean) it was a complex based on "spiritual power" that was "inherently neutral."<sup>49</sup> Although Obeah was largely oriented toward socially beneficial goals such as healing, locating missing property, and protection against illness and other kinds of misfortune, it could also have negative or anti-social dimensions. Yet, the entirely negative view of Obeah that whites largely emphasized during the period of slavery (probably exacerbated by the fact that it was sometimes directed against them), and that has endured until the present day, has distorted the social role that Obeah played in the lives of many enslaved Barbadians, whether of African or New World birth. And the same primary sources that provide information on Obeah and emphasize its evil nature often indicate, albeit indirectly or implicitly, that this view was not entirely shared by the slaves. Bilby's (1993:3) general observation holds for Barbados as well as other areas of the Caribbean:

49. Bilby 1993:14; cf. Curtin 1955:29 who writes about Jamaica: "essentially, obeah was neither good nor bad: it could be used either way."

Europeans' interpretations of obeah were shaped not only by their racialist ideologies and their own cultural concepts of witchcraft, but by the limited opportunities they had to gain information about it ... Viewing slave religion through this distorted lens, the European colonists constructed a myopic, thoroughly negative theory of obeah, reducing it to a kind of virulent witchcraft augmented by the use of poisons ... So deeply ingrained has this misinterpretation of the nature of obeah become that it is now accepted to varying degrees by Caribbean peasants themselves.<sup>50</sup>

Slave medicine, including the practices associated with Obeah and the meaning of the term itself, changed over the two centuries of plantation slavery in Barbados. However, the task of charting these changes is immensely difficult because of the paucity, ambiguity, and superficiality of the available information and the ethnocentrism and racism of the writers who produced it. Although Obeah cannot be considered a religion as such (cf. Bilby 1993:14), and never developed into a well-defined system with an integrated set of beliefs and practices of cult groups comparable to Santería in Cuba or Voodoo in St. Domingue,<sup>51</sup> eighteenth-century Voodoo

50. Contemporary historical scholarship also often tends to stress the anti-social dimensions of Obeah, relying too heavily on the Eurocentric perspectives of the primary sources, or on secondary sources which convey this position. For example, Patterson (1967:188) writes "Obeah was essentially a type of sorcery which largely involved harming others at the request of clients"; for Watts (1987:545n18) "Obeah was a type of sorcery or witchcraft, which may be broadly equated with West African 'bad medicine'"; and Raboteau (1978:34) defines Obeah as the "use of magic for evil" (see also, for example, Bennett 1958:22, 80; Genovese 1972:171-72; Watson 1979:87-88; Sheridan 1985:78-79; Dirks 1987:153-57; Richardson 1997). For perspectives that tend to emphasize the socially positive in Obeah, see, for example, Brathwaite 1971:162, 219; Higman 1984:271-72; Chambers 1997:88-90; Fry & Wood 1998:57-58 and, especially, Bilby 1993. Some of Sereno's (1948) discussion of the positive aspects of Obeah in the late colonial period is relevant to the slave era.

Barbadian culture has changed considerably over the past several decades and Obeah does not play the role that it did in earlier times. Yet, in contemporary Barbados, particularly among the lower or working class, belief in the occult persists, and Obeah is viewed as fundamentally evil. Its practitioners, it is believed, have the power to harm and control people, and misfortune, including mental illness, can be explained in terms of an Obeah spell. Despite this emphasis on malevolence, Obeah can also be used for socially beneficial purposes such as healing or giving assistance in other areas of life (Sutton 1969, cited in Fisher 1985:105; Watson 1979:87-88; Fisher 1985:106-7, 132; Gmelch & Gmelch 1997:145-46).

51. Myalism was an eighteenth-century Jamaican cult that functioned to counteract the influences of witchcraft/sorcery. There is no evidence, however, that such a group, either in name or practice, ever existed in Barbados. Nor does it appear to have existed in other areas of the Anglophone Caribbean. Contemporary writers, however, commonly assume such to be the case based on discussions of Jamaica. It is simply not true, as asserted by Abrahams and Szwed (1983:138), for example, that myal is mentioned "by nearly every observer of West Indian life at one time or another," although their comment may be generally applicable to Jamaica. For a lengthy discussion of myalism and an intelligent challenge to customary scholarly interpretations of it, see Bilby 1993:26-33.

offers an analogy for understanding what may have occurred in Barbadian Obeah. David Geggus (1992:30) speculates "that what eighteenth-century French colonists called Voodoo may have been in reality a multiplicity of ethnic- or locally-based cults that expressed divergent rather than common identities and only later became integrated." Obeah in Barbados may have developed in a broadly comparable fashion. What whites included under the rubric Obeah in the earlier slave period, around the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth, was probably composed of different, albeit broadly related, beliefs and practices deriving from several West African ethnic traditions.<sup>52</sup> Over the years, as fewer Africans were transported to Barbados and as an Afro-creole culture developed on the island, what was called Obeah evolved into a loosely defined complex involving supernatural practices related to healing and protection and centered on the role of the Obeah practitioner.

Although whites in Barbados were commonly using the term Obeah by the early eighteenth century, or earlier<sup>53</sup> – which is of an undetermined African linguistic derivation, see appendix – the term may not have been widely used by Barbadian slaves during this period when many were African-born and from different ethno-linguistic groups. However, by the end of the eighteenth century, when the great majority of slaves were creoles, the term Obeah was employed by persons of all racial groups, although whites and blacks tended to place different emphasis on its meaning and functions.

However Obeah was conceived or defined by different racial groups in Barbados, there is no doubt of its association with medicinal practices. In general, there is every indication that European medicine was not more efficacious in treating common ailments than the slaves' self-help practices, or even the body's own natural defenses. Even in the best of circumstances the medical care that Barbadian slaves (and whites) received from European medical practitioners (creole or foreign) was singularly deficient when judged by modern standards. From the mid-1600s through the early 1800s the "therapeutic efficacy" of medicine in Britain, of which white medicine in Barbados was essentially an extension, "remained hopelessly hit-and-miss ... the doctor was inevitably tarred with failure and identified as the accomplice of disease and death" (Porter & Porter 1989:27, 64, 74-75). Even with improvements in plantation health care during the nineteenth century (e.g., smallpox vaccination), it is doubtful that in and of itself

52. Barbadian slaves, reported Hughes (1750:15) in the 1730s and 1740s, "are very tenaciously addicted to the rites, ceremonies, and superstitions of their own countries."

53. BL, Sloane Manuscripts 2302, Letters from Thomas Walduck to James Petiver, November 1710-September 1712; Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Archives, London, Letter Books, Series B, vol. 6, 62, Letter from Arthur Holt to Henry Newman, February 18, 1729; Hughes 1750:15-16.

European medicine had a major impact on the health and longevity of the slave population. "In truth," Kenneth Kiple (1984:154) writes, "the slaves would probably have been better off with their own practitioners, for white medicine in the West Indies was, to put it charitably, of low quality" (cf. Higman 1984: 261; Sheridan 1985:333-36). Since European medicine often failed to successfully treat a variety of ailments and did not necessarily show itself as a superior system, the continuing dependency on Obeah people, Negro doctors, or other types of healers who did not claim supernatural powers was supported by social as well as medical reasons, and slaves did, indeed, rely on "their own practitioners." These "practitioners" played fundamental roles in slave medicine and self-help throughout the era of slavery, and they played important roles in the direction taken by Barbados' folk-healing tradition in the postemancipation period.

#### APPENDIX

##### ON THE EARLY USE OF THE TERM OBEAH IN BARBADOS AND THE ANGLOPHONE CARIBBEAN

Although it remains an open question where and when the term Obeah (as differentiated from the variety of beliefs and practices associated with it) was first used in the Caribbean (the earliest recorded usage occurs in Barbados), scholars agree that the term itself ultimately derives from some African language or languages. Cassidy and LePage (1967:326) tentatively note that Obeah probably derives from multiple sources, and give words, with malevolent meanings, in Efik and Twi as possible sources. A Twi (Gold Coast) origin, with its implication of witchcraft/sorcery is more commonly given (e.g., Patterson 1967:185-86; cf. Field 1961:137), and this etymology, with its negative implication, is often accepted, albeit uncritically, by scholars who rely on secondary sources in the British Caribbean literature for their information. Yet, as Richard Allsopp (1996:412) has recently observed "no precise origin [for the term] has been determined, but some items esp[ecially] in W[est] Afr[ican] lang[uages] suggest a connection." Deriving his information from English dictionaries of several African languages/language groups, he gives words in Twi, Efik, Igbo, and Ibibio that refer in one form or another to evil magic or sorcery/witchcraft although the term means "practitioner, herbalist" in Ibibio.

With the exception of the Ibibio word, every discussion of Obeah's etymology traces it to a root with socially negative or malevolent meanings. Bilby (1993: 24-26) offers a very different perspective in his sophisticated and critical discussion of the etymology of the term and the variety of meanings attributed to it. Although agreeing that the term derives from an African language, Bilby rejects most conventional interpretations and

makes a solid case that there is simply insufficient historical or linguistic evidence for assigning a meaning in which "we can have reasonable confidence." More significantly, he argues that the meanings often attributed to Obeah derive from assumptions in the written sources that it is "essentially malevolent witchcraft; [thus] it is not surprising that etymologists looking for parallel words in African languages have focused their search on terms that are usually translated into English as 'witchcraft,' 'sorcery,' and the like." But, Bilby asks, "what if the search had started from a different initial assumption?" Since etymologists have started with the assumption "that Obeah denotes evil sorcery," they "have predictably succeeded in finding words in a number of African languages that are phonologically somewhat similar to Obeah and have meanings related to witchcraft or sorcery." However, he suggests that if etymologists were to view Obeah "to begin with as a kind of neutral or positive spiritual force," then etymological discussions might go in another direction and find the roots of Obeah in other linguistic contexts and languages.

An example of an African linguistic context in which the term Obeah or some cognate form has positive or morally neutral meanings derives from evidence from Igbo and related languages of the Niger delta region. As noted above, the term Obeah can mean "practitioner, herbalist" in Ibibio (Allsopp 1996:412), or, it could be, as Harry Johnston (1910:253) suggested "a variant or a corruption of an Efik or Ibo word from the northeast or east of the Niger delta, which simply means 'Doctor'" (see also Chambers 1997:88-90 for a discussion of the role of the *ndi obea* or *dibia* among the precolonial Igbo).

I suggest that English-speakers in the British Caribbean adopted the term from some African language (Igbo or Igbo-related?) without being aware of its full meaning in that language group. The adopted term referred, or was related, to some occult role or practices which, although not fully understood by Europeans, were not of European origin. Europeans (i.e., native English speakers) continued to use this term to refer to an increasingly wide range of supernatural-related practices followed by the enslaved (regardless of their ethno-linguistic origin) but which derived from several West African cultural traditions. Later, the term was adopted in the Caribbean by other enslaved persons from other African-language groups or of creole birth. The term diffused throughout the British Caribbean and came to be employed more widely by whites as well as by the enslaved themselves; however, the latter, as argued in the main body of this paper, viewed the practices associated with Obeah in much more socially beneficial terms than the former.<sup>54</sup>

54. The argument presented in this appendix is greatly elaborated in a paper co-authored with Kenneth Bilby that will be published in *Slavery & Abolition* in 2001.

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